THE DIALECT OF STAITHES IN THE NORTH RIDING OF YORKSHIRE

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Reprinted from the
Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, 1948.

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The prospect of undertaking the study of the dialect spoken in an unfamiliar village may be an anxious one, because success is dependent upon the co-operation of the inhabitants. Therefore, when, last summer, I arrived at the North Yorkshire fishing village of Staithes, I was relieved to find that most of the people I met were very ready to help me in my investigations.

This was partly because Staithes people are still proud of their vernacular and are willing to talk about it. Of course, my reception certainly varied. Most people were ready enough to tell me local words, but were reluctant to go through the long word-lists, based on Wright's *English Dialect Grammar*, which are so helpful to a thorough study. In this respect, I found a surprising difference between the men, who thought of all kinds of " slang words ", as they call their dialect words, but disliked the lists; and the women, who thought of few, but were very patient with my questions. The great difficulty was in finding a time when the busy fishermen could be persuaded to talk. They would not speak when they were busy working in the boats, nor, contrary to my expectations, was there much dialect to be heard at the daily fish-sale. But when the day's work was done, and the fishermen sat down in their cellars to net or *brede* [bri·əd] a crab-pot, they would tell me all I wanted to know about boats, or winds, or weather. At other times they would gather at the home of one of them. On such an occasion I was given the local names of all the parts of a crab-pot, and had the processes of finding broken fishing-lines, of shooting them, of beaver-trawling, and of hoisting sail, all explained to me in detail.

Quite apart from its profusion of local terms, Staithes is a good area for the historical study of dialect. It is still isolated to-day, for it is right on the sea-shore, hemmed in by great cliffs, and a mile away from the main road. Up to the coming of the buses twenty-odd years ago, infrequent trains were the only means of communicating with the scattered towns round

about. Thus the dialect has been well preserved, especially among the fishermen, who, even to-day, do not have much occasion to go far from Staithes. The number of inhabitants —about fifteen-hundred—has also helped. It is large enough for the speech community to be resistant to change. It is small enough to remain an integral speech area. Finally, the village is situated sufficiently far north to be largely free from contamination by dialects of a different medieval type.

Nevertheless, the Staithes dialect contains frequent pronunciations that originate from further to the south. For example, we should expect to hear [biˑət] for *boat* and [riˑəp] for *rope*. Instead, we have the more southerly types [buˑət] and [ruˑəp]. Again, *cold* is regularly [kɔˑəd], but the verb *fold* is [fauld], an early R.S.E. form, which possibly filtered in owing to the neglect of the equivalent native form in favour of some synonym such as *lap* [lap]. When a word is only infrequently employed in Staithes we certainly find these Standard forms. Farmers round about the village use both [jal] *ale* and [jakər] *acre*. Staithes people say [jal]; but, because they seldom use the word *acre*, they have forgotten the traditional form and now employ the R.S.E. word, modified in accordance with local habits of speech. So we now hear [ɐˑəkər], virtually a distortion of R.S.E. [eɪkə]. But the very fact that these irregularities stand out so prominently only shows the relative purity of the dialect. It is really engrossing to see how it behaves according to well-defined rules; words which had *ā* [a:] or *ō* [o:] in O.E. normally have [iˑə] in Staithes to-day; as for example: [tiˑəθ] (O.E. *tōþ*) *tooth*, [riˑəf] (O.E. *hrōf*) *roof*, [liˑəf] (O.E. *hlāf*) *loaf*, [stiˑən] (O.E. *stān*) *stone*, [biˑət] (O.E. *bāt*) *boat*. Words which contained medieval *al* now have [ɔˑə], e.g. [sɔˑət] *salt*, [bɔˑək] *baulk*, [wɔˑək] *walk*.

Of course, there are difficulties and problems. For example, for *pork*, *fork*, *work* (verb), *cork* and *scurf*, we find in Staithes [pɒlk], [fɒlk] [wɒlk] [kɒlk] and [skɒlf] respectively. This occurrence of *l* for *r* seems to be unparalleled in dialectal English. But problems are part of the day's work, and generally some solution can be found.

But my study was not confined to the sounds of my dialect, or to their history. I spent two weeks collecting fishing terms. It is in these particularly that I found real Old Norse influence.

I was told on my first day in Staithes, [uːər niːəmz ɪz səpuːəzd tə bɪ dęːənɪʃ niːəmz] *our names are supposed to be Danish names*. But in the fishing vocabulary the evidence was even clearer. The word [gręːəð] *grathe*, used to describe the finding of a broken fishing-line on the sea-floor, by means of a grapple, is descended from O.N. *greiða*. The [swɪp], i.e. *broken* end of a fishing-line, is from O.N. *svippr*. The small flag-stick on top of the fishing-line buoy is called the [skęːər] *scare*, from O.N. *skǫr* (i.e. joint). Of Norse origin, too, are [skęp] *skep*, the wicker tray used for carrying the baited lines, [bęːət] to *bait* the lines,* and perhaps [skęːən] *skane*, i.e. to remove mussels from their shells.

But it is interesting also to see that many of the words, particularly for fish, cannot be traced to their origins, and are perhaps a witness to native inventiveness. [ɒlgɪn] *olgin*, [mɒp] *mop*, and [liːət] *leeat*, for various kinds of *cod*; [tɒmiːər] *tomear*, a member of the shark tribe, [pɪlkɪnz] *pilkins*, a type of young whale, [kwiːniz] *queenies*, [badʒəz] *badgers* (starfish), [pugz] *pugs* (i.e. gurnets), [skwɪd] *squid* (i.e. a small herring)—these are all striking names, but from etymologically doubtful sources.

When the fisherman describes a fishing process, he talks a language of his own. One evening, I was shown, with the aid of fishing-lines produced from storage, the method of preparing a line for sea. A fishing-line is made up of [θɒtiːn ɔːəf piːsɪz] *thirteen half-pieces*, joined with [ɔːəfpiːs nɒts] *half-piece knots*, each being [θɒtɪ fɒdm] *thirty fathoms* in length. There are [aɪtiːn skuːər arək iːəks] *eighteen score haddock-hooks*, and twenty-five [ɔːvər iːəks] (haaver-hooks) i.e. large hooks (see *E.D.D.* under *haaver*) on each line. The hooks are [wɪpt] *whipped* to the end of nine-inch lengths of cord called [sniːədz] *snoods*, and these are fastened to the line by a process called [sętɪn] *setting*. The join is called the [kęlkɪn] *kelking*. There is one [ɔːvəriːək] to every twelve small or [arək] hooks. The three-foot spaces between the hooks are called [fiːəks] *fakes*. If the fishermen fasten hooks and snoods together in readiness for setting, these snoods are called [rɪdɪ rękənz] *ready reckoners*. A fishing-line is baited with mussels which have been [skęːənd] *skained*, i.e. shelled. The hook is put through the whites of

* From O.N. *skeppa*, and O.N. *beita*, " cause to bite", respectively.

three mussels. The mussels are then turned over and hooked again through their tongues. Having been baited, the lines are coiled up in a pile or [bɔ·ək] *bauk* on the *skep* with the baited snoods lying out at the front, and each being laid over its coil, a process which is called [auəlatjin] *overlying*. The fishing-lines are always [*fɐt*] *shot* with a strong tide flowing or ebbing; the fishermen talk of [*ʃi·ətin*] *shooting* the lines. First of all, the buoy or [baul] *boul* is shot with [fɐtɪ fɐdm] *forty fathoms* of [tau] *tow-rope*. Attached to the end of this is [taŋkər] *the anchor*, at the end of which is the line. Two lines are joined together. A smaller buoy or [kɛsn baul] *cast buoy* is then shot. This process is repeated, a third couple of lines are shot, and finally the last buoy or [baul].

The language used in describing this process, and in that of crab-fishing, certainly gives the impression of a genuine traditional dialect with a vocabulary that is both rich and specialised. Staithes vernacular is undoubtedly vigorous to-day. But its focal point, the fishing fleet, is gradually vanishing. Not many years ago there was a big fleet employing half the men in the village. Men of seventy or so well remember the spectacle of a hundred-and-thirty cobles ranged on the shore. Now there are only about a dozen active fishermen, and about a score of older retired men. With the decline of the fishing industry more men have sought work outside Staithes in the steel and iron works at Skinningrove, where they meet men from other areas, with consequent detriment to their vernacular speech. Other disintegrating linguistic influences are introduced by women who, having refined their speech when in domestic service elsewhere, have returned with alien habits of speech; and by the younger generation, whose elementary or secondary education is affecting the dialect more profoundly than it did even twenty years ago. Again, a group of four or five fishermen goes out singing on Sundays to villages throughout the county. Quick transport takes the inhabitants of Staithes to neighbours in Loftus or Whitby, or Middlesborough. Finally, large numbers of visitors from all over the North come every summer and play their part, all unwittingly of course, in disintegrating the traditional forms of speech.

All these factors have already had two appreciable results. The younger people nowadays have a hybrid speech, which is

partly traditional, partly the result of what they have learnt at school. Many historical elements are quickly vanishing, but the dialectal pronunciations remain where they are similar to those of R.S.E. Secondly, many of the older people employ two forms of speech, one the old Staithes dialect, which they use amongst themselves, and the other a much modified form of R.S.E., in which they converse with the stranger whose lack of comprehension by turns amuses and infuriates the natives. Many people do not now speak the broadest vernacular themselves, but they still remember how it is spoken and are sometimes more reliable informants than those who have retained, but modified, the traditional forms.

To sum up, I believe that while genuine dialectal English can still readily be found in Staithes, it is improbable that the dwindling nucleus of fishermen will long be able to resist the changes evident in the speech of those who have closer contact with the outside world. In Staithes, as often elsewhere, the old is being quickly ousted by the new, the individual by the standardised product. Perhaps, in a few years, the most reliable sources of dialect will be the written records of organisations such as the Yorkshire Dialect Society.

P.S. Readers may be interested to know that I am continuing my study of the Staithes dialect with a view to preparing a thesis for the degree of M.A.

Leeds, November 2nd, 1948.